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CBA Civics Education Committee

In SUPPORT HB5285 (section 5)

Education Committee  
March 4, 2022

Good Morning Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, and Honorable Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for having me here today. My name is Jonathan Weiner. I am the Chair of the Connecticut Bar Association's Civics Education Committee, and President of the Board of Civics First, which is a nonprofit organization that works with the bar and bench to provide civics education programs to students in Connecticut's public and private schools. I am here to testify in support of House Bill No. 5285, An Act Concerning the Public School Curriculum, and particularly section 5 of the bill, which "would establish a Connecticut Civics Education Task Force to study and develop strategies to improve how public schools provide instruction on civics, citizenship and American government to students." I would, however, respectfully suggest an amendment to subsection (g) of section 5, insofar as the January 1, 2023 deadline for the work of the task force should be extended to render it compatible with the ongoing work by the Department of Education to create a K-8 curriculum pursuant to Special Session Public Act 21-0002, § 374—section 1 (b) of which requires that "model curriculum to include instruction in social studies, including citizenship and government"<sup>1</sup> and "civics and citizenship, including instruction in digital citizenship and media literacy that provides students with the knowledge and skills necessary to safely, ethically, responsibly and effectively use digital technologies to create and consume digital content, communicate with others and participate in social and civic activities."

A report published last year by the [Educating for American Democracy Initiative](#) ("EAD Report")<sup>2</sup> has provided guidance for improving the teaching of civics education via an inquiry-based model that asks students to understand how our democratic institutions work, along with their role in those institutions. The time is now. As the EAD report states: "Civics and history education has eroded in the U.S. over the past fifty years, and opportunities to learn these subjects are inequitably distributed."<sup>3</sup> "Dangerously low proportions of the public understand and trust our democratic institutions. Majorities are functionally illiterate on our constitutional principles and forms. The relative neglect of civic

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<sup>1</sup>See General Statutes § 10-16b.

<sup>2</sup>Educating for American Democracy Initiative, *Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for all Learners* (March 2, 2021) ("EAD Report").

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*, p. 9.

education in the past half-century . . . is one important cause of our civic and political dysfunction."<sup>4</sup> I suggest one need only look to the tragic events at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 as a symptom of the social illness caused by the decline in civics education nationally. This tragedy was an unsurprising result of a surge in voter participation accompanied by a surge in voter misinformation that was decades in the making as a result of the decline in civics education.<sup>5</sup>

Connecticut is well positioned to assess and improve our students' civics education at all grade levels, including the provision of adult education programs.<sup>6</sup> We have a diverse array of organizations that are devoted to making civics education accessible and exciting, with many programs oriented to students in grades K-8. For example, Civics First organizes Middle School Debate and Mock Trial Competitions with the assistance of the Connecticut Bar Association, which teach students how to research and engage civilly, either in the context of a court case or a discussion of a contemporary issue. The Connecticut Bar Association Young Lawyers Section runs Lawyers in the Classroom, which sends volunteer attorneys into elementary school classrooms to engage with students about the rule of law; this program is being expanded to middle schools for Constitution Day. Finally, our friends with the Connecticut Democracy Center sponsor the very popular Kid Governor election for Fifth Graders each year. None of these programs would be possible without hours of volunteer support donated by our bench, bar, and elected officials.

The Connecticut Bar Association stands ready to partner with you, the Department of Education, and our state's teachers to support a bipartisan task force to examine how civics education is taught in our state's public schools. For purposes of administrative efficiency given the ongoing work of the Department of Education to implement the model K-8 curriculum pursuant to § 374 of the 2021 Special Session Public Act No. 2, we suggest extending the January 1, 2023 deadline for the work of the Task Force currently set forth in subsection (g) to no earlier than January 1, 2024. This would allow the Task Force ample time to complete its work in coordination with the ongoing efforts of the Department of Education, and would ensure that the work of the Task Force reflects those efforts, which themselves carry a statutory deadline of January 1, 2023. See Spec. Sess. Public Act No. 21-0002, § 374 (a).

The Connecticut Bar Association supports House Bill No. 5285, § 5, which will encourage the development and improvement of civics education curricula and programming that will foster informed and active future generations.

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<sup>4</sup>Id.

<sup>5</sup>Metrics published by the Center for American Progress indicate the crisis in civics education. For example, only 26 percent of Americans can even name the three branches of government, and public trust in government is at a low ebb of 18 percent, with a serious socioeconomic gap in civics education and engagement. See Center for American Progress, Issue Brief: The State of Civics Education (February 21, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>This may also include consideration of the [Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy](#) that is provided by the EAD report as an "inquiry-based content framework for excellence in history and civics for all learners."